ADVANCING
K12

TECHNOLOGY. CULTURE. LEADERSHIP.

How Data Standards Safeguard
School Data From Ransomware

TACKLING TENSION WITHIN YOUR DISTRICT
STEPS FOR K12 LEADERS

Pennsylvania District Embraces SIS Migration,
Sees Early Success

Let Kids Be Weird:
They Learn Better That Way

SKYWARD®

Welcome to the Spring 2025 edition of Advancing K12.

Spring is known as a time of renewal and growth, but it can be difficult to gain momentum after the winter months. By February or March, routines are in full swing and it's comfortable to settle into them rather than to shake up the status quo. This spring, challenge your district to approach education with a hands-on, eyes-forward mindset.

It's time to roll up our sleeves! This is an opportunity to clear out any negativity or stagnation and to start fresh with new strategies to reinvigorate staff and students alike. In this issue of Advancing K12, you can find ideas for refreshing your district vision with articles like "So You Want to Become a Superintendent," "Let Kids be Weird: They Learn Better That Way," and "Evaluate Edtech Use and Save Thousands."

If these articles spark inspiration for you and your district, I encourage you to discover even more on culture, leadership, achievement, and more at www.skyward.com/blog. You'll be able to find deeper insights to the conversations most important to K12 education, and even more ways to rejuvenate your schools.

I hope the rest of this year provides ample opportunity for clearing out the old to make way for the new, exciting, and engaging. All you have to do is continue looking forward.

My best to you,

Scott J. Glinski

Scott Glinski, Skyward CEO

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ABOUT SKYWARD

Since 1980, Skyward's SIS and ERP solutions have helped more than 2,500 school districts save time, connect with families, and empower success. By blending advanced technology guided by actual users with world-class support delivered with a personal touch, Skyward is the clear choice for K-12 leaders who want to spend less time on tasks and more time with students.

New School Year,
NEW SOCIAL STRATEGY

Sarah O'Donnell in action

Each school year brings opportunities to learn, form connections, make memories, and reach goals. If your district isn't consistently active on social platforms yet, make the upcoming school year you shout your successes from the digital rooftops!

Social media is an amazing tool to boost your district's brand, celebrate successes, and showcase culture—take it from a truly exceptional, passionate, and inspirational K-12 professional who is blazing trails with her storytelling expertise on social media.

To get an inside look at how social strategy can elevate a district's presence, we sat down with Sarah O'Donnell, director of communications at Stevens Point Area School District and recipient of the "Power of Social Media Award" in the 2024 SocialSchool4EDU Best of School Social Media Awards.

Human connection is something we're all looking for.

There are many communication channels a K-12 district may have. In what ways does social media offer a unique ability to share stories?

"Social media provides an outlet for smaller stories and updates that might not be fit for an article or email, but are important to share nonetheless. It's also a great way to engage staff in the storytelling process. Teachers are the hardest working professionals in the universe, and I love helping them find ways to highlight what is happening in their classrooms."

"Additionally, while social media is a great tool for short-form storytelling, it can also move audiences to your district's long-form content. If we have a blog on our website, we can tease it on our social pages and get the story out to a wider audience. Social media has a large reach in our community extending beyond parents, students, and faculty."

Why is storytelling such an impactful social strategy?

"Storytelling connects everyone. It allows me to share things people wouldn't usually understand if they're not in the educational setting every day. Human connection is something we're all looking for."

When everyone in your district has a schedule filled to the brim (yourself included!) how do you collaborate with others regarding social media efforts?

"We've structured our social media presence to include district-level and school-level accounts. More recently, some of our sports teams have wanted their own accounts, too."

"Each account has social media managers assigned to them, and we make sure they're trained on expectations, privacy policies, and uniform branding. Even though each school has its own logo and colors, we want to keep things looking consistent.

"I also send out a monthly staff newsletter including requests for stories, and we have a specific email account where folks can send photos. As we've built a stronger social media presence, faculty have become more receptive to submitting stories. People enjoy being able to see what is happening in classrooms each day."

Schools should ensure they have parental permission before including students in media. How do you streamline this process?

"We really respect parents' privacy. We send an annual opt-out notice to families allowing them to specify whether they want their child in media. Then, we'll send that list to faculty, and student names will stay on the list permanently unless a parent would ask for it to be removed.

"On the back end, we make sure faculty fully understand the implications of the opt-out policy. If a family doesn't want their child in content, that also affects other forms of media like live streams for school concerts. We've found this process to be successful.

"To further protect students, we're cognizant of the types of pictures we're posting. If I wouldn't want that picture of me online, I won't post it of a student. I don't know where the future is going with AI and digital facial recognition, so we're very aware of the responsibility we have to protect our students and represent them in the best light."

How would you describe your creative process, including strategizing and brainstorming content?

"We create an editorial content calendar outlining topics to feature throughout the year. That way, we have content planned and scheduled while allowing for flexibility. Stories will always pop up, and you want to have the time and space for them.

"During the school year we try to post at least twice a day, and we've identified timeframes where we see the most engagement. We're always trying to compete against the algorithm, and we encourage our team to engage with likes, comments, and shares.

"A great way to strategize for future content is by noticing what posts your audience likes best. We also work to provide equal coverage to all our schools. We're lucky they each have their own accounts, because it's easy to share their posts on the district-wide page."

Are there specific metrics you consider when evaluating the performance of your content?

"Our big metric is engagement. We keep an eye on who is following us and how many people have seen our content, but above all, I take note of what's getting likes, comments, and shares. By knowing what resonates with your audience, you'll know what to share in the future."

Can you describe a piece of content that performed particularly well?

"We shared the story of two boys on our cross country team who stopped mid-race to help a competitor cross the finish line. From an engagement perspective, that story performed extremely well. Not only was it great on social media, but we were able to capitalize on some Good Morning America coverage, too. It's a great example of using social media as a platform to reach an audience much bigger than your own."

If you were to give a piece of advice to others in a K-12 communication role, what wisdom would you share?

"Plan for what you can, and then deal with everything else. Trust that whoever you are in that moment will be able to take care of the problem.

"Next, try to connect to a professional organization. I'm the president–elect for Wisconsin School Public Relations Association, and I've found many of us in school communications are teams of one or two. It can feel very isolating because others don't always understand what your job is or what you're trying to accomplish. Find those people who you can text for advice or when you're having a bad day.

"Lastly, find a way to sit in on the decision-making process at your district. That way, when it comes time to communicate announcements, you have a better understanding of why decisions were made. When you're well-informed, you're empowered to do your job better."

Remember, creating and maintaining a school district's social media presence is no quick afternoon project. Before committing to a new communication channel, solidify branding, tone of voice, content creation processes, and overall strategy. ■

STORY BY

Lexi Beecher
To read more from Lexi, visit www.skyward.com/blog

The Emotional Toll of Data Security

While strong feelings are expected in so many facets of K–12 life, the righteous fear of a data breech is too often an afterthought. It shouldn't be—the whole thing is emotional from start to finish.

First, criminals are deliberately attacking a group of children. No two ways around that.

Then, the accusations fly at the folks in districts just doing their jobs (and who probably got their data snatched too).

Finally, the ripple effects of compromised data follow people (kids!) for the rest of their lives.

Emotions run high because schools care deeply about the welfare of students, but understaffed and underfunded IT teams struggle to keep up with the volume and intensity of criminal cyberattacks. After all, when your whole job is to just rip off information from unsuspecting schoolchildren, you're always fresh as a daisy.

How can K–12 business offices compete with that? Lean on the team of helpers you deserve (and pay for).

y in the Business Office

YOUR VENDOR IS HERE TO SUPPORT YOU

Vendors should not only be part of the planning, but should be involved if you have an incident. Your edtech vendors provide support for business continuity and disaster recovery.

Odds are, your system has more security features than you realize. Your support teams can help ensure you're using every feature available to secure your data—and help you rest easy.

BE PROACTIVE SO YOUR REACTIONS CAN BE SWIFT

Here's a way to shift your mindset: Think about logging in to your own bank account online. You'll expect to receive a code to prove it's really you asking to log in—that multifactor confirmation is essential for "the bank of your school" (your ERP) as well.

Any edtech vendor can advise security contacts of the features already available to protect the system from unauthorized access. Plus, other services will do the work of scanning your network from an external standpoint, looking for weaknesses before bad actors can exploit them. This process works both on–premises and in the cloud, and the data discovered helps both the district and their vendors improve.

Many districts elect to move critical data to the cloud to protect super-sensitive student and financial records from falling into the clutches of criminals all over the world. Cloud hosting is more secure due to redundancy, encryption, 24/7 monitoring, advanced security measures, and regular updates—features not feasible with a limited budget and staffing for school districts.

WE'RE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER

Turning the tides back to smooth, confident sailing for the business office looks like having frank and empowering conversations and training. It's a great start to reach out to vendor teams and ensure you're taking advantage of every security feature possible. In the previous business email compromise example, a rogue MFA alert may have tipped off a savvy business officer before an attacker could strip their original password and create their own.

A confident approach to cybersecurity is within reach. ∎

STORY BY

Mike Bianco

To read more from Mike, visit www.skyward.com/blog

ACCEPT THAT YOU'RE A TARGET, AND PREPARE ACCORDINGLY

It's unfortunate to know that schools are considered a soft target for bad actors, but accepting this truth can empower your teams to prepare for if and when a data breach occurs. The days and weeks that follow are not only filled with hard work of recovering data, getting systems back on track, and resuming business, but also speculation and bad press. By accepting ahead of time that this may happen in your district, your communications can be confident, clear, and concise.

Business office staff are often targeted in phishing scams. A fraudulent link arrives in an email that uses specific, sophisticated social engineering designed to get users to click, which gives the sender access to the business officer's inbox and email credentials. Keep in mind, this person was targeted specifically because of the level of access their credentials will allow an attacker to gain in a financial system. From there, a domino effect using updated credentials result in the attacker gaining access to sensitive systems and locking the employee out of their access to the financial system. Business grinds to an expensive halt.

Most commonly, attackers will choose to infiltrate payroll systems and change ACH account information from correct employee accounts to their own, stealing folks' paychecks. Districts find out when staff report not being paid. Nightmare fuel.

So You Want to Become a
SUPERINTENDENT

While superintendents are undoubtedly educators, their impact shifts dramatically.

Superintendency shifts from doing to theorizing, planning, strategizing, and becoming the delegating visionary. In fact, superintendents are more likely to impart knowledge on fellow administrators, principals, and teachers, even if it's designed to trickle down to transform student experiences for the better. What superintendents give up is the act of imparting knowledge directly to students—the direct action of educating kids—the (doing) in a K-12 school. If you're unwilling to give up doing, then *explore* your outlets outside the district office; your leadership for clarity is invaluable.

If you're ready to spacewalk into the unknown galaxy of district outcomes, strap in.

THE DIFFERENCE A DISTRICT-LEVEL ROLE MAKES

New superintendents move from a classroom or school–office setting into a district–level, school–board–liaison role. Ideally, they'll have some classroom experience under their belt, because ultimately every decision will impact each classroom and student.

POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

One responsibility of superintendents is to enact the policies their elected school board approves. This is the agreement between the two camps: the school board will decide the policies, and the superintendent agrees to put them into place.

Superintendents are accountable to their employees, but also to their boards. This dual responsibility requires a diplomatic and delicate balance because, the reality is, the board and the staff don't always see the same vision. It's up to the superintendent to work their strategic magic to unite the district and the board.

DIRECTION AND DELEGATION

There's a familiar, bittersweet pang watching kids grow up and watching people do your old job. After all, you found so much fulfillment and achievement in that role—the nostalgia is real.

However, if you can hurdle that heartache, inspiring the new guard of classroom educators is worth it.

While it's true shifting to district-wide leadership will be different, keep focus on your reasons for making the switch. Change happens at scale as well as individually.

RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

The big picture shifts, and district-wide resources come into sharp focus. It's the superintendent's responsibility to ensure students get the best education possible, and that means carefully stewarding budgets, resources, staffing, and more. All the moving parts to making school happen occur on the superintendent's watch, and their success or failure impacts the entire district.

Superintendents must be able to see reports, dashboards, and live data to guide decision making daily. A combined student information system and enterprise resource planning system can make this process a little easier: student needs and achievement are available at a glance, and employee well-being and development are also at their fingertips. Data must be easily broken down by grade level, school site, and many other filters. Plus, a reliable way to manage mass communication makes urgent messaging easier in the event of emergencies, inclement weather, and sharing exciting news with the entire district and community in one fell swoop.

MISSION, VISION, VALUES

Above all, superintendents understand the mission and vision district leaders have worked hard to put into place. This deep understanding keeps a focus on student success, whether it's enacting school board policy or helping little ones in the lunch line. When leaders are laser-focused on the vision, their example inspires everyone else to follow suit. That's how great, lasting school culture is created and how school climate is elevated. While superintendents are preoccupied with advancing progress for all, teachers can care for the important one-on-one tasks with students.

A great superintendent is as important to a school district as each individual teacher, student, volunteer, administrative assistant, and lunch server. Everyone does their part to make school a little better for students. ■

STORY BY

Erin Werra
To read more from Erin, visit www.skyward.com/blog

Go further with productive PD

If PD starts to feel like a chore, give it a charge with a few helpful ways to keep it productive:

GET IN A GROWTH MINDSET

Development should be a benefit, not a bother:

- Illustrate the value of the training or sessions staff members are expected to attend.

- Be transparent about your expectations for after PD, and keep them reasonable.

- Schedule group PD throughout the year and during contracted hours.

OPEN UP STRATEGIC OFFERINGS

Give the people what they want and what they need—at the same time!

- Find the overlap between whole-district needs and individuals' wants for PD.

- Find a PD focus and build on it year after year to avoid initiative fatigue.

- Use built-in training options within your district's edtech for quick PD power-ups.

TALK IT UP AND CELEBRATE

Build excitement beforehand and reward efforts after for all-around effectiveness:

- Have school communications pros explain and demonstrate new initiatives to build buy-in.

- Celebrate real results with real rewards—reflect PD achievements in teacher and staff salary.

For the full article, visit skyward.com/blog and search "Productive PD: Building a Growth Mindset from Burnout."

4 Creative Culture Considerations to Retain Teachers

Increase teacher engagement with culture initiatives that can make your district a great place to stay:

ROUTINE:	RETAIN:
Enticing teachers with "family culture"	**Investing students in school culture**
Teachers have families, and this phrase may hint to a lack of work/life balance.	Walk the culture walk by putting students in charge of activities that uplift the whole community.
Admin in the office	**Admin on the move**
Less visibility can lead to a gap in understanding and empathy for the day-to-day work of education.	Set aside time each day to walk the halls and make stronger connections with staff and students.
Standard social media	**Standout social presence**
Doing the minimum on social media is not enough to engage current and future staff.	Use your socials to spotlight district successes, creativity, and innovation. Public appreciation goes a long way for retention!
"Leader" as a label	**Making authentic teacher-leaders**
Leadership opportunities can turn into heavier workloads without added incentives, souring the experience for staff.	Develop leadership roles with unique titles, duties, and pay scales to ensure a balanced load and a pathway for growth.

For the full article, visit skyward.com/blog and search "4 Creative Culture Considerations to Retain Teachers."

Evaluate Edtech Use and Save Thousands

United States schools spent over $27 billion on edtech in 2021.[1] If your district is like many others, there's plenty of opportunity to trim the fat in edtech budgets.

Virtual learning led to experimentation, which is good. Now that school is evolving and federal COVID relief dollars are running out, it's time to take a good, long look at edtech efficacy, use, and budgets. Which are worth the investment? Here's a high-level look at how to begin to answer that question.

1. Find the apps

This is the hard part—the perpetual whack-a-mole of identifying loopholes, one-offs, and shadow apps.

The number of tech products has nearly tripled over the past six years.[2] That's a lot of apps to track, not to mention learn, and maintain. According to a customer survey by Lightspeed Analytics, districts reported more than 2,000 apps in use. 300 apps made up 99% of total usage, while an additional 1,700 apps were used less frequently.[3]

Another hard part.

If the app has no proven, vested interest in education, does it belong? Maybe.

Surface-level first impressions don't always tell the whole story—for example, non-educational apps such as social media platforms may still play a niche role in certain classrooms. But not every app marketed for education is actually educational anyway.

Pro tip: look for independent and peer-reviewed research instead of research bought and paid for by an edtech start-up. Remember: efficacy might look different for individual platforms, especially for administrative software. Learn how different districts have navigated the complex process of choosing new SIS and ERP systems that weather decades of use.

2. Evaluate efficacy

3. Eliminate duplicates and risks
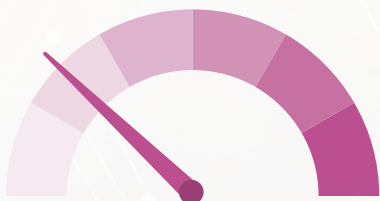
Now things are getting a little easier, at least technically. It can be difficult to pare down apps that do similar things—after all, there's a reason they were all chosen by the educators using them.

Curriculum guidelines can help. Watch for similar apps and trim the overlap.

Scrutinize apps with privacy policy changes. The same Lightspeed survey revealed 91% of applications used in school districts had multiple changes to their privacy policy—the median being three changes per app.[3]

Don't get fooled by flash.

Edtech companies sell edtech. Edtech partners support edtech users. The market is shifting to favor the latter, but that doesn't mean the former is going to disappear. On the contrary, they may even get more tenacious. Remember, marketing budget and targeted ads ≠ efficacy. Be especially wary of companies who make bold claims without the (independent, peer-reviewed) proof to back them up.

4. Compare the market

5. Ask your neighbors

What do you do when you're in the market for a large investment at home? You read reviews, and reviews are gold. Word of mouth is the best way to get a real, honest look at the good and the bad of edtech (and many other things).

Most district leaders truly enjoy comparing notes on what is working and what isn't, and are happy to share both good and bad experiences.

Now that you've purged your edtech, how will you prune future additions to ensure the plethora of applications doesn't grow wild?

This is a function for the IT department of course, but it's also a culture question. There will always be a trendy new application educators want to explore—at least, we hope so. It's how edtech will evolve. Build a sense of caution into the school technology culture. After all, students deserve the most effective, safest edtech available, and that's not always the newest, flashiest edtech. ∎

6. Adjust school culture
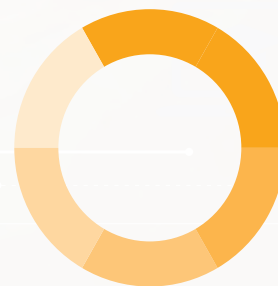
[1] "Education Technology (Ed Tech) and Smart Classrooms: Market Study by Global Industry Analysts, Inc." StrategyR. Global Industry Analysts, Inc., 2023.

[2] "EdTech Top 40: Fall 2022 Report." LearnPlatform, 2023.

[3] Bock, Brook, et al. "2022 Edtech App Report: Analysis of Findings from Lightspeed Analytics." Lightspeed Solutions, LLC. 2022.

Editor's note: This post originally appeared at Emerging Edtech.

STORY BY

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4 CRITICAL COMPONENTS
OF K12 DATA SOLUTIONS

Looking to make a big edtech purchase, but not sure what to look for? Here are four non-negotiable, must-have features and qualities of a strong edtech solution that will withstand the test of time.

1

DATA ACCESS AND VISIBILITY

An SQL database allows for flexibility in reporting, and data should be able to be imported into any field using custom importing tools. Demos should show multiple years of data on a single screen, showcase flexible reporting, and make it easy to complete more in-depth data mining.

2

CUSTOMIZED SCREENS, DASHBOARDS, AND HOME PAGES

Flexibility is the name of the game in edtech purchasing. You should be able to customize the home screen, and ensure you'll have anything time-sensitive brought to your attention quickly—push notifications, flags, and interactive tiles are just the beginning.

3

EASY TO LEARN

Ask yourself: is the edtech interface built with users in mind? Consider your least-tech-savvy when watching demonstrators cruise through screens and clicks and calls to action (buttons). Support materials should be available free and plentiful, with enhanced opportunities that may come at a nominal cost.

4

BUILT AND MAINTAINED IN-HOUSE

A solution built, maintained, and enhanced in-house by the same vendor team-not Frankensteined together from multiple solutions purchased over time and tacked on-is not too much to ask for. Districts that choose edtech solutions built with users in mind enjoy flexibility and freedom to build an interoperable system that works best for them.

For the full article, visit skyward.com/blog and search "4 Critical Components of K12 Data Solutions."

Owen J. Roberts Technology Department: (Back row left to right) Greg Deshong, Frank Cicitto
(Front row left to right) Veronica Cousens, Kathy Reynolds, Paul Sanfrancesco

SPOTLIGH

Pennsylvania District Embraces SIS

Owen J. Roberts School District uses the power of positivity to assist in migration to Skyward Qmlativ as their new SIS.

For over 10 years, Kathy Reynolds has been the backbone of her district's administrative operations, using Skyward's SMS 2.0 to manage everything from attendance to complex data reporting. In 2024, she faced a thrilling new challenge: migrating her district, Owen J. Roberts School District (OJR) in Pottstown, PA, from SMS 2.0 to Skyward's cutting-edge Qmlativ Student Information System. It was a big decision—and one that was years in the making.

IT STORY

S Migration, Sees Early Success

"We'd been talking about migrating for a while, even before COVID threw a wrench into our plans," Reynolds recalled. Then, when the opportunity to make the switch finally arrived in late 2023, the excitement was palpable, and Reynolds and her team were ready to embrace the future.

Why Qmlativ?

When OJR decided to migrate, it wasn't just about getting the latest software; it was about rethinking how the district could operate more efficiently and enhance the experience for staff and students alike. Qmlativ promised the game-changing features district leaders were eagerly waiting for, starting with its reporting capabilities.

"We were so excited about the reporting features," said Reynolds. But it wasn't just about raw data—it was about real-time access to data, beautifully displayed on intuitive dashboards.

Change can be daunting, but with a positive mindset, it becomes a powerful catalyst for transformation. This was the driving force behind one school district's successful transition to a new student information system, proving that a positive approach can unlock the true potential of any change.

The Migration: Embracing Change, Navigating Hurdles

With the decision made and excitement running high, OJR's migration to Qmlativ kicked off in October 2023. The district hit the ground running, setting up the new system, configuring the reports, and preparing their staff for the transition.

"We knew it wouldn't be without its challenges, but we were ready," said Reynolds.

The migration was scheduled to go live in the summer of 2024, but it wasn't a straight line from planning to implementation. Reynolds, having worked through other SIS migrations before, knew this would take careful planning and some strategic juggling. The district needed a phased rollout, with the heaviest

> **"Everyone loved the dashboards, from teachers, to nurses, to office staff. It's a huge improvement over what we had."**
>
> *- Database Coordinator, Kathy Reynolds*

users—the office staff, administrators, and secretaries—trained first.

The biggest challenge? Getting everyone on board with the change.

"Let's be real, change is hard," admitted Reynolds. "Luckily we weren't getting any pushback. It was more about easing everyone into it."

Strategic Training and Preparing for Success

Reynolds knew that training would be a make-or-break factor in the success of the migration. Rather than settling for a few training sessions, Reynolds created a full-blown plan to ensure that OJR was ready for Qmlativ by communicating early and often.

Official training kicked off in early 2024, with the heaviest users getting access to Qmlativ by February. From there, Reynolds worked tirelessly to ensure everyone had the resources they needed, even creating custom documents to capture the specific reports staff needed.

"I wanted to make sure that as soon as we went live, our staff members had everything they needed," said Reynolds. "We didn't want anyone left in the dark."

> **"It's not always easy, but the benefits of moving to Qmlativ have been clear from the start. The system is intuitive, powerful, and makes everything easier."**
>
> *- Database Coordinator, Kathy Reynolds*

From left to right: Kathy Reynolds and Spring Cornell

> **"We had been using several different platforms before, but having everything under one roof is making our work so much more efficient."**
>
> *- Database Coordinator, Kathy Reynolds*

From left to right: Frank Ciccitto and Kathy Reynolds

Real-Time Data, Better Efficiency

When OJR went live with Qmlativ in summer 2024, the results were transformational. They quickly saw the real-time data features shine, especially the live tiles that provide instant access to everything from attendance numbers to discipline referrals, all without the need to run complex reports.

"The live tiles are incredible," said Reynolds. "They show you what you need to know immediately. It's a total game changer for how we manage our data."

Beyond the dashboards, Qmlativ allowed OJR to consolidate various platforms into one streamlined system. Whether it's tracking discipline referrals, managing attendance, or viewing enrollment numbers, everything is now in one place.

"We had been using several different platforms before, but having everything under one roof is making our work so much more efficient," explained Reynolds.

Advice for Others

Reflecting on the migration journey, Reynolds shared some key insights that shaped the district's success:

• **Change can be daunting, but it's worth it:** "It's not always easy, but the benefits of moving to Qmlativ have been clear from the start. The system is intuitive, powerful, and makes everything easier."

From left to right: Kathy Reynolds and Danny LaRosa

• **Focus on the positives:** "Instead of just telling staff what's changing, make a point to highlight all the exciting new features. It's all about showing people the cool new stuff they can do. For example, 'Did you know Qmlativ can do XYZ?' That kind of excitement goes a long way."

• **Assess and improve:** "Migrating wasn't just about adopting new software; it was about evaluating how we were doing things and finding ways to make them better. Qmlativ helped us do just that."

Looking Forward: What's Next for OJR

OJR's journey with Qmlativ isn't over. The district is focused on taking full advantage of Qmlativ's advanced reporting tools and features. One of Reynolds' main goals for the coming year is to get one more school on board with the discipline module, ensuring full adoption across the district.

"I want to continue gathering feedback from our end users to see where we can improve and what tools they need to do their jobs even better," said Reynolds. "Getting everyone comfortable with the advanced reporting features is a big priority for the upcoming year."

By embracing the migration to Qmlativ as an exciting opportunity rather than a hurdle, OJR not only overcame the typical challenges of a system transition, but also turned them into a chance to improve and grow. Today, OJR is more efficient, connected, and ready for whatever the future brings. ∎

STORY BY

Cassidy Downs
To read more from Cassidy, visit www.skyward.com/blog

METACOGNITION IS THE SUPERPOWER KIDS NEED FOR THE FUTURE

The artificial intelligence takeover has become a promise and a threat. Media outlets are quick to hype a future built on AI—it will flip your burgers, write your ad copy, and design your art. What will humans do?

With any luck, humans will be shepherding AI's burgeoning skills into a utopic, rather than dystopic, direction. And they'll need a new set of skills to do so.

One among many uniquely human gifts that cannot be duplicated by AI: metacognition, or thinking about your own thinking. In fact, we need metacognition to train artificial intelligence. Here's how schools can help students craft this invaluable skill.

What is metacognition?

Metacognition is the practice of thinking about your own thinking and learning. It is a complex skill involving feedback loops in the prefrontal cortex of the brain. To achieve metacognition, students must know themselves quite well and have a certain level of familiarity with learning strategies—not enough to be a pedagogical expert, but enough to know there are different strategies available along with the wherewithal to choose from tools in their mental toolbox.

Metacognition can be learned, practiced, and refined over time.

Why practice metacognition?

The benefits of metacognition prime students for lifelong learning and can even compensate for IQ and knowledge (Swanson, 1990).[1] Simply put, metacognition unlocks shortcuts to better learning for any student. By understanding the many ways they think and learn, people become better problem solvers. They make better decisions. And they have a greater self-concept. None of these skills are easily taught, but metacognitive skills behind them can be practiced.

Examining one's thought process can also bolster other cognitive abilities such as emotional intelligence and anti-bias. These types of skills are extremely expensive and time-consuming to try to teach on the job, which can give students a boost in future careers. Thinking about thinking primes kids for next-level and lifelong learning. It's domain-agnostic and helps kids sharpen learning skills regardless of content.

Who can achieve metacognition?

By now, discerning educators may be envisioning their own populations and mentally sorting students into different levels of metacognition. It's true, some students seem naturally primed for the curiosity, self-awareness, and reflection metacognition demands. Still, let's double down

[1]Swanson, H. Lee. "Influence of metacognitive knowledge and aptitude on problem solving." *Journal of Educational Psychology*, vol. 82, no. 2, June 1990. pp. 306–314.

on who can achieve this next-level thinking-about-thinking skill: it's everyone.

Metacognition has been studied in pigeons, rats, dogs, birds, and dolphins. Students are absolutely capable, even if they're not used to it yet.

Adults across the district can brush up on metacognition alongside professional development sessions, during lesson planning, and as expert coaches for the mini-metacogniteurs. Finally, anyone who can learn and practice a new skill can develop metacognitive skills alongside it.

Challenges to achieving metacognition

Capability doesn't equal automatic achievement though. Metacognition happens in our brains without us even noticing, so while we might be born learning, we're certainly not used to zooming out to quantify the process.

The process of examining our learning takes work, preparation, and practice. It demands students display a fairly complex level of self-awareness that can be hard for adolescents to access. And it is just plain tiring—a student might say it "hits different" than a typical serve-and-return, sit'n'get lecture style.

Since the process is fairly self-contained, documenting it is helpful to fulfill proof of mastery.

And there's the pesky truth that prefrontal cortexes remain under construction until about 25 years of age—but that isn't a magic finish line after which everything becomes clear, including why we can't eat exclusively Flamin' Hot Cheetos® and must consume the occasional carrot. Rest assured the partially developed pre-frontal cortex is capable of learning the ropes of examining its own processes.

Easy ways to achieve metacognition

Good news: students are probably already practicing thinking about thinking. If they've ever made and crossed off a checklist, wrote a reflection essay, or explained their work, they're no stranger to metacognition.

Checklists show students a framework for completing a task, breaking it up into smaller tasks that build to a final product. These feedback loops provide an onramp to higher-level reflection.

Rubrics show different levels of mastery and cognition. Offering credit for students examining process notes—which could be outlines, research notes, or previous drafts—can help students map their thinking process.

Defining and modeling multiple learning strategies offer students an intro to thinking tools they can eventually choose from. While students are often earmarked based on their natural or favored types of learning, any student can try out different methods.

Feedback, whether self-, peer-, or expert-provided, is crucial to refining skills over time. This is the cornerstone of metacognition as well. Students can get comfortable offering feedback on others' work, and then practice self-evaluation: looking at their own work with a critical eye. The ability to give and accept feedback will pay dividends in future workplaces and classrooms. ∎

STORY BY

Erin Werra
To read more from Erin, visit www.skyward.com/blog

TACKLING TENSION
Within Your DISTRICT

Quick: How do good leaders diffuse tension among their staff and beyond?

Instinct may suggest you channel the class clown to diffuse the tension with a laugh, but that doesn't bode well for long-term solutions or resolving intense conflict. Leaders don't always cause disagreements, but they're responsible to support solutions. Here's how to manage tension in the ranks without burning away all your emotional and diplomatic energy.

Building relationships before tension arises

As a trusted leader, you've already laid thousands of hours of groundwork. Strengthening a relationship between yourself and your direct reports looks different for every leader, but each has an underlying element of psychological safety. People feel comfortable becoming vulnerable, a key step to identifying and puzzling through a problem with you.

With any luck, they will remember that psychological safety before tensions flame.

To solve disagreements between parties in your district, you'll be tasked with the difficult role of neutral mediator. Staff on your team may feel you're not supporting them as well as you could, and families or community members will feel you're siding too strongly with your staff. But toughing it out between this rock and hard place can transform school culture.

Discovery

Tension is a symptom of a conflict, not the problem itself. The process of identifying the actual problem is nuanced: as a neutral party, you'll be pulling at the thread of tension to unravel the conflict causing it.

Start by gathering the facts from the experiences of both parties. Aside from listening in person, surveys, one-on-one meetings, and small group meetings might provide the insight needed. Each person has their own perspective, and the truth exists in the ether between them. If leaders only stopped at individual perspectives, they'd be customizing solutions in endless ways. Instead, leaders hold the thankless task of finding common ground and moving forward.

Folks with backgrounds in customer service may be familiar with the phrase, "Listen to learn, not to form your rebuttal."

Both parties will appreciate being validated. This doesn't mean you're agreeing with their assertions. It simply means you acknowledge their feelings and hear their words—believe it or not, it helps a lot to hear that out loud. "I hear you. Let me repeat your points back to you to make sure I have them right."
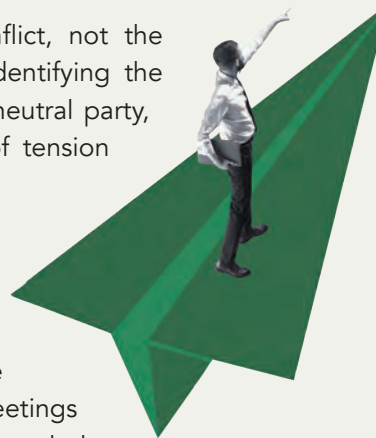
Simplify

Once you understand where each party is coming from, it's time to distill the problem down to its purest form. Sure, a parent might be irate that their student's school bus has been late for the last two weeks, but that tension could be completely unrelated to the true cause (perhaps the bus driver has a personal matter interfering with work scheduling, for example. Something you unearth during your discovery mission).

Your calm neutrality is crucial to diffuse the emotional tension obscuring the true conflict, which will give you the clues you need to invent a solution, however complicated or simple it may be.

Diffusing tension between your team and outside stakeholders

As the mediator, you'll need to be willing to be a go-between in the face of rising tensions. Your mission is to work hard to see where each opposing force is coming from. Resist the bewitching temptation to pick your teammate's side by default, adopt an adversarial mindset, and set up camp—doing so will create an even greater amount of tension. Plus, your community deserves a fair shot at being heard.

Why are district leaders roped into conflicts between staff and families, anyway? Not only do your teams look to you for guidance and protection, but there's the simple fact that your district exists under your leadership. Each person who represents the district represents you. "The Buck Stops Here" isn't just a cheeky sign on a former President's desk—it's a leader's choice to accept the consequences of behavior on behalf of a direct report who is unwilling or unable to do so. And when we agree to become leaders, we agree to stop passing the buck. The environment you create in your district is your responsibility, during smooth sailing and during rough waters.

It's still part of your job to get into the weeds and figure out classroom stuff alongside educators. This includes parental conflicts and concerns at the classroom level.
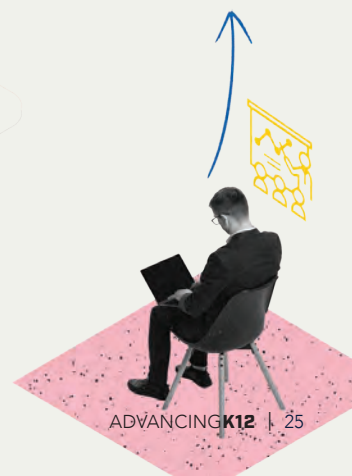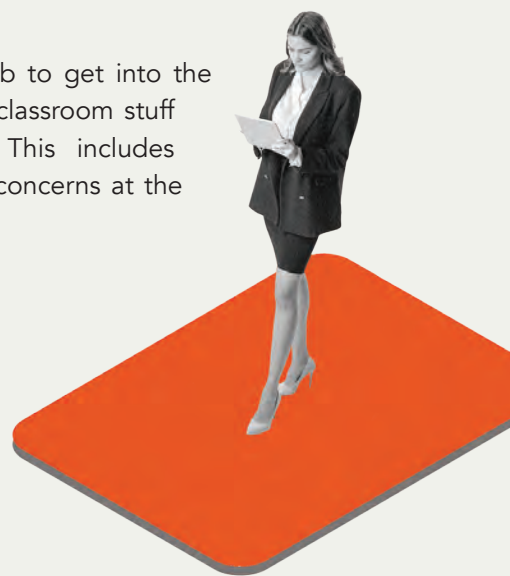
Taking feedback and making it right

If the art of giving feedback is delicate and nuanced, the art of receiving feedback is even more so. It's easy to downplay your involvement with a situation—so easy we do it unintentionally, telling ourselves it doesn't concern us or require our attention. The problem is in the eye of the beholder, we reason: their opinion is theirs and not widely shared.

This may or may not be true, but as a leader you still need to track down the facts and do something about it. If nothing else, your inaction will send a message to your team: there's no point in giving feedback if nothing will come of it. Over time, hard-won trust is eroded.

Now, this also doesn't mean you need to jump into action and solve problems as quickly as you can—on the contrary, you'll need to be prepared to outline your plan for addressing the problem. Try to be transparent about a timeframe for resolution. People may not be happy (after all, instant gratification has bewitched the population) but at least you've held up your end of transparency.

Be as open as possible but stop short of breaching confidentiality. You can still validate and assure a fix is in the works without spilling all the relevant details.

What if there's tension but people won't talk about it?

As a leader you'll face uphill battles trying to implement a culture shift with veteran staff. When the climate between staff becomes toxic but no one is willing to talk it out, what options are you left with?

Leaders do still have a responsibility to step in. You'll need to rely on skills such as patience, investigation skills (think neutral questions, "I statements," etc.), and relationship building. If people are unwilling to respond verbally, an anonymous survey might lead you in the right direction.

The process will be slow, but your actions should aim to build trust to get closer to a solution. It's still worth working at a problem for a 50% solution. It's better than nothing. Progress builds trust over time.

Last but certainly not least, building a positive school culture with a mission, vision, and values can help create a unified image of success. At the very least, falling back on that foundation can help remind all parties what's really important: the students we serve. ∎

STORY BY

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5 (MISGUIDED) Assumptions About Teachers

There is still so much to learn about what we *think* we know about teaching.
Here's the truth behind five common misconceptions:

They have answered a calling

Teaching is work, like any other job.
Teachers still need work/life boundaries and balance.

It's a profession for life

Putting undue pressure on teachers to stick with it in the face of burnout
is unfair, especially when teaching skills are highly transferable.

Contracted hours are fair

The schedule may say eight hours, but teachers' days can creep up to
over 10 hours[1], with no overtime pay.

Summers off!

Summer *is off*, but the paychecks are too. Teachers choose to either stretch
nine months of pay to cover 12, or go without for the summer months.

Teaching energizes us!

Teaching can drain energy just as fast with administrative tasks,
emotional and physical labor, and extracurricular responsibilities.

For the full article, visit skyward.com/blog and search
"The 5 Assumptions We Make About Teachers (And Why They're Not Right)."

1. Walker, Tim. "Survey: Teachers Work More Hours per Week than Other Working Adults." NEA, National Education Association, 18 Sept. 2023.

LET KIDS BE WEIRD

YOU'VE NEVER KNOWN WEIRD UNTIL YOU'VE

While teaching To Kill a Mockingbird in English 9, I was about as excited as the students for a comprehensive unit-end exam or a dry five-page essay. Instead, they had project options, including creating a group video. The videos were unhinged. Awkward. Chaotic. They were crammed with meme references and TikTok dances. But they were also crammed with poignant analysis on characterization, story development, historical context, and theme. Leaning into weird led to learning for everyone—teacher included.

Those weird and wonderful projects were successful because they acted as a vehicle for student personality and creativity that daily assignments generally didn't, but who says daily assignments need to feel so everyday? Kids are weird, and the more weirdness that can be brought out by everyday learning, the better off schools and kids will be.

Unfortunately, education hasn't always been known for wild and unbridled creativity and self-expression for students, which is complicated further by rigid curriculum and testing requirements that schools are mandated to fulfill. But even with something like Common Core State Standards, the requirements are only for the content that students need to learn, not the way in which they learn it. For all the discourse on learning styles, differentiation, and choice, the processes for assessment, data collection,

and standardized testing remain diametrically opposed to that messaging. At the end, it winds up creating a system of learning to take a test and pass a class, rather than learning to learn.

> ### Why is it hard to believe that students aren't capable of choosing the avenues in which they can fulfill content learning requirements?

To begin building educational pride-in-ownership, any part of learning that can be created from a student's hands should be: lesson activities, study methods, test prep, assessments—anything. Not only will it give them an inherent sense of investment in their own learning, it will also provide a deeper understanding of how education itself is constructed. It's the same principle of teaching a man to fish: If a kid reads a rubric, they learn to follow your expectations. If the kids write the rubric, they learn to create the expectations on their own.

This is all to say that stubborn disengagement will still exist, no matter how weird and wonderful education can get. But even though kids are weird, they're not indecipherable. On the contrary, kids tend to be very overt

WATCHED A STUDENT-MADE VIDEO PROJECT.

about the things that capture their interests—it's usually the things they're doing in class instead of work. Kids are playing co-op games, playing chess, watching TikToks, drawing marker tattoos, zoning out to music—you name it. It's easy to lament the distraction their devices provide, but hyperfocusing on controlling devices means short-sighting an alternate viewpoint on the issue: can those distractions be repackaged as learning? A caveat, however: the same-old schoolwork done on a cell phone is still just the same old schoolwork.

If students have limited agency over their learning, they are going to take their attention elsewhere. Students ultimately want to learn, however, and will learn on their own if they have the right application for the concepts. Need to learn color theory for art class? Why not explore that through creating makeup palettes or cake decorating? Want a student to demonstrate proficiency in applied math? Let them redecorate their room or refurbish a camper van! Let the students and their imaginations go wild. But, you know, with documentation—which is a great segue into familiarizing the students with the inner workings of their school's learning management system. By allowing them the freedom to explore their passions and tracking what students choose, schools can get a true picture of the students' interests and strengths, and where they could take these skills in their futures.

> **Leaning into the weirdness of kids can be scary, but it would be a disservice to let your fear get in their way.**

District leaders tend to take on an unwritten accountability to have irreproachable, tried-and-true educational practices happening under their purview. While this is an admirable aspiration, it unfortunately leads back to a trickle-down of rigidity and ultimate disconnect at the ground level. Giving up a portion of educational control to the young people is a big step into the unknown, but full transparency and authenticity paired with multiple avenues for feedback from all sides is the best step forward. Send a straightforward message: "We're trying a process new to the district, and new to the students. There will be times when we're figuring it out together, but there will always be a lesson learned and opportunity for growth." ∎

Now get out there and get weird.

STORY BY

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HOW DATA STANDARDS SAFEGUARD SCHOOL DATA FROM

One thing we know for sure: schools are targets for ransomware.

In fact, between 2021 and 2023, the rate of attacks nearly doubled for K12 schools—from 44% to an astonishing 80%, according to a survey of 3000 education sites by Sophos, a cybersecurity firm based in the United Kingdom. These attacks spawned from many entry points. The top three include:

1
Exploited vulnerability

29%

2
Compromised credentials

36%

3
Malicious email

19%
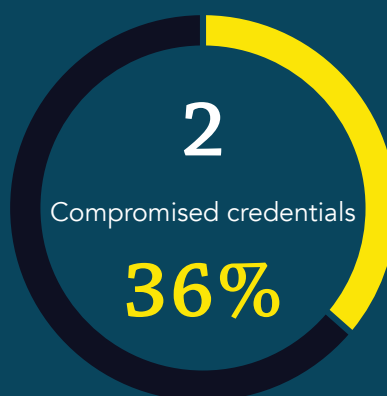
As far as security goes, one powerful shield against attacks is data encryption. But what does data encryption look like in K12 technology? Let's take a look at how data standards create a safer way to encrypt precious information and save big bucks.

INTEROPERABLE SYSTEMS HAVE FEWER MANUAL REQUIREMENTS FOR DATA TRANSFERS

Fewer manual transfers, connections, and uploads mean fewer weak points for exploitation. Application programming interfaces (APIs) provide a secure, encrypted connection between systems. If you're able to communicate from system to system directly, it saves time managing authentication processes for multiple systems and reduces the possibility of errors during dual-entry processes. After all, each point of authentication is a potential access point for a bad actor who has captured credentials. They may be well guarded, but the door is still there.

CHOOSING A DATA STANDARD

Take for example Ed-Fi standards. This data standard builds documentation and security into the systems and processes they work with.

The benefits don't end there. Educators, vendors, and tech experts across 36 states have joined the Ed-Fi alliance, agreeing to the standards of data maintenance and protection. It makes it easy to travel between buildings or even to other districts without sacrificing security. Imagine the possibilities as students move or transfer schools!

CHOOSING EDTECH SOLUTIONS MADE TO WORK SEAMLESSLY

What exactly does interoperability look like? Since it's more of a behind-the-scenes idea, it's hard to picture. It's more about what interoperability DOESN'T look like. The fewer times staff have to interact to facilitate transfer from one system to another, the better.

This might look like a learning management system (LMS) that communicates seamlessly through an API with your student information system (SIS). With so many different combinations of edtech and so many unique school goals,

the combinations really SHOULD be endless—and your vendor should know how to guide you through the process of building up and locking down an airtight system process.

OTHER BENEFITS HELP RETAIN GREAT STAFF

Data standards and interoperable systems not only protect precious data and networks but also make life easier for users. When software does the work of shuffling data around, reporting trends, and mining data to help dig into trends, educators have more time to connect with students and their colleagues. Everyone wins.

ENCRYPTION WORKS AS PART OF A LARGER SECURITY STRATEGY

The good news is 99% of K–12 victims of a cyberattack were able to restore their data from hackers, even if thieves had encrypted the stolen data. This is slightly higher than the global cross-sector average of 97%. The bad news is costs skyrocket when extortion is involved, and schools were way more likely to pay to have data either returned or remain unsold by bad actors. Bad actors are able to encrypt the data they steal, so even if it's recovered, IT pros may not be able to decrypt it. There's no overstating the importance of backing up your data in multiple secure locations.

When attacked, most (73%) of K–12 schools used backups to restore data. 47% paid ransom to get the data back. It's worth noting a quarter of respondents used multiple methods to restore data.

While we'll never stem the criminal attacks, investing in cybersecurity preparedness at least gives K–12 tech pros a fighting chance. ∎

"The State of Ransomware in Education 2023." Sophos, 2023. (All of the data points in this article use this source.)

STORY BY

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10 WAYS TO

TEACHER TOOLS

1. Attendance

Use Tardy kiosks and Positive Attendance to put attendance accountability into the hands of students themselves.

2. Gradebook

An SIS gradebook with LMS interoperability keeps data and the school day flowing faster and easier.

3. Behavior tracking

Tracking behavior trends over time gives teachers insight into managing negative behaviors before they escalate.

4. Mobile Access

Ensure users have access to a mobile app that makes it quick and easy to enter grades, give feedback, and manage behavior anywhere with an internet connection.

USE YOUR SIS TO BUILD EDUCATOR SUPPORT INTO SCHOOL CULTURE

ADMINISTRATOR VIEWS

5. Dashboards display data

Easy-to-customize dashboards literally put data at an administrator's fingertips, and live data ensures regular updates so admins know where their finite attention can best be focused.

6. Push notifications

Set up push notifications (and shut off unnecessary ones) to take quick data on the go through Mobile Access.

7. Security features

Look out for helpful programs, resources, and support as you plan your cyberattack response protocol ahead of an attack.

SCHOOL-TO-HOME COMMUNICATION

8. Contacting families without sharing contact info

Your SIS should have a built-in messaging center designed to make it easier for teachers and parents to stay aligned on children's progress.

9. Automation

When edtech makes administrative tasks easier, educators can focus their energy on building relationships and addressing students' needs.

10. Parent Portal app

Reserving one portal for parents on a handy phone app can help ease communication fatigue and get families to pay attention to their children's progress.

For the full article, which originally appeared at District Administration, visit skyward.com/blog and search "10 Ways to Use Your SIS to Build Educator Support into School Culture."

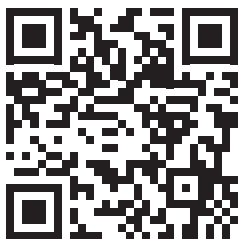# Are you finding AdvancingK12 magazine **helpful** and **inspiring?**

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